

Leadership

Some Guidelines for Transforming
the Organizational Structure



These guidelines are addressed to those new leaders who intend to make a difference, and who are willing to pay the price. Committed leaders learn as they go. They embrace and refine those strategies that work and discard those that fail and learn from them.

by Kendall L. Stewart M.D.

Introduction

Why do inept leaders flourish? How do organizations sometimes succeed in spite of them? Why do responsible persons stand idly by while poor managers do irreparable harm? Why do so many of us find ourselves flailing miserably in organizational cultures poisoned by mistrust and uncertainty, pawning creative productivity for another addictive hit of torpid gossip at the cooler? What can a new leader do to transform such a culture into an environment that enables, energizes, motivates and inspires?

Here are some answers. These guidelines are addressed to those new leaders who intend to make a difference, and who are willing to pay the price. Committed leaders learn as they go. They embrace and refine those strategies that work and discard those that fail—and learn from those. They draw their strength from the people they serve. They help to build places where the best people want to work.

Effective leaders come in all flavors. There is no one recipe to follow. Real leaders cook on instinct. They may add more of this or that ingredient, but they are all passionate chefs. They enjoy the heat. They are all driven. They are tough. They never quit.

Their different backgrounds and styles notwithstanding, the best leaders do have some things in common. They are clear about where they are headed. They have a plan for getting there. They would love to tell you about it. And they would agree that the following guidelines are some of the keys to leadership success.

Clarify your personal values

Ed is an aging golden boy. The former protégé of an influential attorney, he has mastered the art of business poker. No one ever really knows what he believes, exactly what he is thinking or what he is going to do next. He smiles and agrees with everyone. Junior executives leave meetings confident that Ed is supportive of the group's conclusions. As they prepare to follow through on the decision they believe was agreed to, they are stunned when one of Ed's cronies announces that the boss has now decided on a different approach. Confronted with this behavior, Ed smiles and boasts that his unpredictability keeps subordinates on their toes.

Actually, just the opposite occurs. When field hands are uncertain about which way the wind will blow next, they are more interested in weather vane gazing than hay baling. Unambiguous, value-based leadership encourages workers to take the initiative, confident that actions consistent with the leader's values will be supported. Spineless leaders who bow to the prevailing wind and send no signal except

uncertainty convince their followers that a defensive crouch is the organizational posture with the best survival value.

Identify the values that drive you. Discuss these openly at every opportunity. Invite your colleagues to challenge you when your behavior appears to be inconsistent with these values. When you are explaining the reasons for your decisions, demonstrate how your position is consistent with your values. Remind yourself and others that value-based leadership always provokes opposition from those embracing contrary values. Principled leadership is never the course of least resistance.

Spineless leaders who bow to the prevailing wind and send no signal except uncertainty convince their followers that a defensive crouch is the organizational posture with the best survival value

Select the right leaders

Margaret was promoted to head ago. She inherited a nest of dysfunctional leaders who have been around for a number of years. Each enjoys some support in the organization, and each possesses some strength. Extruding any one of them would be politically costly. Cleaning house is always a seismic event in any organization. Margaret longs to be loved; she cannot afford to frighten the rank and file. After all, she repeatedly reminds herself, the perfect team is only a mirage. Such things don't exist in real life. However, her well-intentioned rationalization affords meager comfort. Dysfunction still reigns. Mediocrity is acceptable. Personality, not performance, is the preferred topic of conversation. And it is all Margaret's fault.

This truth is painful. You must be ruthless. Not every leader you choose need be a star, but each must be a contributing team player. When you tolerate incompetent or disruptive leaders, you send a demoralizing message to every member of your organization: our leader is too weak or dull-witted to identify the problem and take the necessary action. Settling for excessively flawed leaders undermines your credibility and compromises your ability to lead. Fail to act, and you will be viewed as just another inept leader who should be replaced. Being loved is not your principal objective. Strive instead for effectiveness and respect.

Build a leadership team

Tim rarely meets with his subordinates as a group. They have each requested individual weekly meetings where they can persuade without being challenged, gossip behind their colleagues' backs, extract ill-advised promises and elicit the personal attention they crave from the boss. Capitulating to these weak leaders' neediness, Tim goes along, oblivious that he is limiting their growth and the team's maturation.

Organizational arsonists in search of a distraction regularly ignite the dense undergrowth of petty jealousies and tender sensitivities that always spring up among team members competing for the spotlight.

As a direct result of this misguided individual attention, Tim's team fails to speak with one voice. This means that the team spends most of its energy fighting internal brush fires.

Insist that your senior leaders function as a team. Keep everyone fully informed. Encourage full and frank debate. Come down hard on leaders who fail to support the final position. Make every important decision in the team environment. Schedule individual meetings with team members only as an exception, never as a rule. Encourage team members to challenge everyone else on the team including you. Refuse to listen to a complaint about a fellow team member unless the complainer has already confronted the perceived offender appropriately. When whiners demand confidentiality in an attempt to sow team discord without being held accountable, firmly and repeatedly avoid complicity by taking the information directly to the person being attacked. Effective team leadership is rare in most organizations. That is because leaders talk a good game, but usually fall for the seductive need to retain control.

Become personally engaged

Laura delegates freely—too freely. During most meetings, she sits in the back of the room. She arranges for a subordinate or a consultant to conduct the meeting while she catches up on paperwork or fingers her personal digital device. She makes a point to come to the meeting in time to make her motivational opening remarks, but she slips out at lunch to deal with another pressing matter. She spends time outside the room on her wireless phone dealing with more important things. When in the room, she conducts sidebar conversations about unrelated issues with those unfortunates sitting next to her. Others have commented that she does not appear engaged. She is clueless.

People are not stupid. They will figure out right away what merits your full attention, and they will conclude that this is the only stuff that matters. When they observe that you are not fully engaged in an activity or project, they will blow it off too. They may slouch through the project because that is the politically correct thing to do, but their minds will be elsewhere and their hearts will pump resentment. No one appreciates having his or her time wasted.

If you can't muster genuine interest in the project at hand, pretend. If you can't put on a convincing act, stay away. If you find yourself authorizing a bunch of organizational projects or activities that really don't interest you, quit it. Focus the organization on what matters to you. Immerse yourself as a passionate participant and active learner. If all you can really get excited about is Happy Hour and your next round of golf, give your colleagues a break, and get another job.

Clarify your expectations

Tom is only clear about his expectations when he criticizes something his subordinates have done or not done—and he does that a lot. He never seems to be entirely pleased. When folks begin an explanation or presentation, he interrupts with tangential questions. When they pause, uncertain about where he is going with this line of questioning, his tone of impatience implies that they are ignorant. No matter what position a colleague takes, Tom takes the opposite view. Challenge, disagreement and uncertainty characterize most of his interactions with subordinates. With superiors, he is the nicest guy in the world.

Folks sentenced to work with such a leader never know what to expect. Anticipating a poisonous strike, they focus on snake charming instead of making the case or implementing a plan. They leave most meetings wounded or weak with temporary relief and sick with apprehension about the next encounter. Leaders who fail to clarify their expectations and react predictably are puzzles with ever changing pieces. Experience counts for nothing. Effort is thwarted. Interest cannot be sustained. A clear picture will never emerge.

Don't leave others guessing. Explain what you are looking for. Describe the kind of case you find persuasive, the elements you expect to see in it, and the approaches that sustain your attention best. Clarify whether you would rather read a report or watch a presentation. If your usual attention span is ten minutes, ask only for the executive summary, not the entire report. When a colleague produces the sort of presentation you prefer, make it clear that this is an excellent example of what you expect. When a presentation falls short, compliment the organizer's effort and identify what was missing. Stop expecting others to read your mind, particularly when you are always changing it.

Specify whether you are informing, consulting or seeking consent

Ellen insists on setting up a committee to consider every important issue. She rarely attends these meetings herself. If she does show up, she asks open-ended questions and then listens intently for about five minutes before rushing to a more important meeting. She is careful to avoid sharing her view, relying instead on banal pronouncements intended to convey her passionate interest. Her blather reveals nothing and convinces no one. After a few meetings, the committee decides on a direction or reaches some conclusion and the chair makes an interim report. If the direction or decision doesn't suit whatever Ellen happens to be thinking or feeling

at the moment, no further committee meetings are scheduled. Instead, a "reorganized" group is subsequently formed to plod through the same pointless exercise of trying to figure out exactly what Ellen wants. She wonders why her staff members are so reluctant to serve on committees.

People will gladly tell you what they think if they believe you really want to know. Tell them what you intend to do with their opinions. If you require their consent to proceed, let them know. If you are only seeking consultation, make that clear. Whether you follow their counsel or not, they expect you to thank them for their investment and to inform them of your final decision.

If your colleagues come to view you as a black hole, always siphoning but never sharing information, they will resist your efforts to draw them out.

If the decision has already been made and you are informing them as a courtesy, say that up front. They will appreciate your honesty. Appearing to invite input as a persuasive ploy to bring others around to your point of view will backfire every time. Few persons manipulated in this way will tell you what a fool you are to your face, but you can bet there will be a sign on your backside that all the world but you can see.

Seek influence, not control

Roger is hyper. He makes everyone around him uneasy. He makes assignments, then pesters folks with incessant phone calls requesting meaningless updates. He insists on detailed written reports that distract from the project's momentum, then ignores them and asks for more. For Roger, constant reinforcement is the only poultice that soothes his fevered need to believe he is a player, that he has some value and that he really is in control. When subordinates show some initiative or independence, it frightens Roger. He wants everyone to be dependent on him, to be beholden. Roger surrounds himself with cautious drones and then bemoans their lack of creativity and innovation.

Is it not clear to you that today's leaders control less and less of what is going on in their organizations? You can exert considerable influence. You can wield very little control. First, the workers you need most are bright, motivated self-starters; they are also independent people. Second, talented employees can work anywhere they wish. If they

don't like the way you treat them, they will work somewhere else. Third, you are not smart enough to be in control. You couldn't perform most of your employees' jobs if your bonus depended on it. Finding effective ways to exert a helpful influence on your colleagues is your only real option.

Clarify your position

No one is ever entirely sure where Serena stands. She tries her best to tell everyone what they want to hear. Her current position usually depends on the last person who talked to her. Serena works hard at never getting caught with a final position. She takes perverse pride in keeping her options open, in being "flexible." Some things actually get done in spite of her leadership, but they are flukes that occur when Serena is on vacation or distracted by some absorbing organizational uncertainty.

Everyone expects to know where you stand. When an issue arises about which you already hold a considered opinion, go on the record with that position right away. Folks will give you a reasonable amount of time to develop a thoughtful position if you don't already have one; indeed, they expect something more than a shot from your hip. Even the most partisan advocates will concede, albeit grudgingly, that you have the responsibility to consider both sides of an issue.

Initiate your process of study, consultation and reflection with dispatch and in an atmosphere of openness and receptivity, but don't permit this process to drag on forever. Your exploration, if conducted publicly and in a spirit of objectivity, will often produce a most pleasant surprise: a consensus opinion about the best way to proceed. Even when that does not occur, your announced decision will receive considerable support as a result of the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process.

Make a compelling case

Jim is a showman. He is long on flash and short on substance. He is the life of the party. People enjoy being around him. Blessed with boundless energy, he agitates, motivates and inspires. He talks constantly, confident that so long as he is speaking no one will ask questions. Others often go along with Jim out of sheer fatigue—he pulls them along with the force of his personality or finally wears them down. When followers are asked about the cause they have just joined, their stupor is startling.

If you expect people to follow you for any length of time, you must learn to make a compelling case for why they should. You must convince them that doing what you want them

to do is in their own best interests. This is not to imply that an emotional appeal has no role. Actually, an emotional appeal is more likely to succeed in the short term. However, long-term commitment usually rests on a more reasoned judgment. Emotion drives decisions; reason sustains them.

Forge relationships through real work

Nell understands the importance of team bonding. She opens every meeting with an icebreaker. She mails out at least a dozen handwritten notes every day. Nell's team has climbed walls, bested obstacle courses, mastered rapids and survived together in the wilderness. Nell encourages practical joking and horseplay, instigates water fights in the afternoons and organizes competitive games at the company picnic. She schedules a team-building exercise at least once a quarter. Nell has even arranged for karaoke and brought in palm readers and masseuses. In spite of all this team building, most of the team members despise each other. They despise these silly exercises. And they despise Nell.

Team building is critical to your success. Get on with it. Do not waste time and energy on foolish relationship-building exercises that serve only to annoy and to demonstrate that you can't think of anything better to do. The best team relationships are built in the context of real work, real risks and real results. Design an actual project that matters, a project that participants can look back on with pride when it is done. Then go to work. Divide up the responsibilities. Identify specific objectives. Set deadlines. Hold each other accountable. Challenge and encourage each other. Work through the inevitable conflicts that will occur. Deliver on time and under budget.

Celebrate the team's accomplishment. It may not turn out perfectly, but it will turn out very well. After you and your team members have experienced something like this, you will never suffer those infantile exercises again.

Be forthright

Frank is a poker player. He always holds his cards close to the vest. "Information is power" according to Frank. He prides himself on understanding what makes others tick. He asks a lot of questions, listens intently, makes assumptions about others' motivations and speculates about how others will react. For Frank, secrecy is the key to success. He thrives on gossip and cultivates an extensive network of organizational moles. He insists that his confidants keep his comments confidential, and he does his best to imply that taking others into his confidence is the ultimate personal favor. When asked something directly, Frank dissembles, feigns ignorance,

turns the question on the questioner or answers an entirely different question more to his liking. When against the wall, he adopts the politician's preferred strategy—he gives an answer conveying the least possible information based on the most favorable interpretation. Frank talks a lot, but no one seems to remember what he said. They are convinced that he is not to be trusted.

There are some approaches that will incline others to view you as a forthright person, but if these are employed as manipulative techniques others will seize on your lack of sincerity in short order. Your heart must be right. Your reputation for forthrightness is built over time in many different contexts. It is this reputation for forthrightness that matters most.

Conduct yourself as an honest leader would. Avoid one-on-one meetings that are easily misconstrued. Instead, meet in small groups where others can corroborate and clarify what transpired. When partisans sneak in to lobby for their positions, send a follow up letter to document their appeal and your response. Ask for consideration of your position, acknowledging that not everyone agrees. Openly admit the weaknesses in your argument before others point them out. Indicate a willingness to change your mind if new information comes to light. Do not dissemble. Above all, build and nourish relationships with honorable persons who will vouch for your sincerity when you are under attack.

For a variety of reasons, leaders cannot always be entirely forthright. To pretend that you are being completely forthcoming in this circumstance is a serious mistake. "I cannot comment fully on this matter at this time because . . . What I can tell you is that . . ." is a more reassuring response. People do not expect to always be told the whole truth. They do expect to be told nothing but the truth. They expect to be led, not misled.

Strive for consistency

Moody and unpredictable, Marti often surprises and frustrates even those who know her best. Enthusiastic and supportive when an idea is presented in private, she may attack the concept as the most ridiculous notion she has ever heard when it is later presented to a larger group. This is especially likely to occur if the idea comes under withering political fire or when thoughtful analysis reveals significant flaws in the proposal. With Marti, every idea is a trial balloon. By only supporting winning ideas, she is never embarrassed by having to admit she was wrong or having to sound a strategic retreat. As a result, the organization takes few significant risks and settles for easy victories. Uncertain

about how Marti will react, her team members are reduced to timid court attendants who are more concerned with staying in her good graces than getting the job done. The need to accommodate strangles the will to innovate.

Within a few months of your assuming a new leadership position, the folks that work with you ought to be able to predict your reactions accurately 99 percent of the time. Your consistency permits those who support you to take risks, to be creative and to act independently with the confidence that they enjoy your full support. This can only occur if your leadership is values-based, goal directed and focused on documented performance.

Explain your decision-making process. Insist on thoughtful analysis before committing yourself. Be clear about your goals and the strategies and techniques you prefer in getting there. Emphasize that you want to be predictable, and invite your colleagues to challenge you when you behave inconsistently. When they do, gratefully acknowledge the legitimacy of their perceptions, admit your failure and take advantage of this opportunity to get back on track.

Encourage constructive conflict

Ralph just wants everyone to get along. He can't stand conflict. If he senses that a particular issue is likely to be controversial, he avoids bringing it up. When disagreement erupts, Ralph quickly moves on to the next topic. Everyone then understands that further discussion of the former topic is off limits. Ignoring difficult issues in the hope that they will eventually go away is his preferred approach to problems. Ralph's colleagues have come to understand that they are expected to go along or remain silent. As a result, all of the important conversations occur as sidebars.

Lead a thoughtful decision-making process that encourages the consideration of other points of view. Actively solicit constructive challenge, and insist that the opposing case be heard. Recognize that a business plan and a sales pitch are two very different things. Ask for data instead of relying solely on opinion. Avoid impulsive decisions based on the feelings of the moment, and beware passionate persuaders.

An emotional appeal is usually an attempt to camouflage a weak case.

Identify measurements that matter

Beatrice wants to succeed; she really does. She extols the virtues of core competencies, competitive advantages, market dominance and superior quality. She expects to become an industry leader and a shining example of organizational excellence. Bea is a passionate advocate of world-class customer service, a champion for workplace safety and proponent for corporate citizenship. She is quickly building a national reputation for exemplary business leadership.

Motivational preaching without accountability is the chosen strategy of the tent revivalist. It only works if you keep on moving to the next town. It is not enough to feel and to believe that your organization is the best. You must prove it. Choose measures that matter. Not just any indicators will do. Key performance indicators must be credible metrics that mean something to your folks on the front line, numbers that can be compared to the best performances in your industry. These numbers must convince the strongest skeptics that you and your organization are willing to pay the price to stand among the very best. Achieving excellence at this level is never a short-term project.

Become a specialist (at something)

Myron decided in college that he wanted to be a manager. He enrolled in a MBA program right after graduation and took his first job as a manager right out of business school. A competent manager, Myron has never developed a real specialty, convinced that “a capable manager can manage anything.” Recently, he was promoted to CEO of a highly specialized consulting firm. Every professional employee in the firm is some kind of specialist—except Myron. His secretary still checks his email for him. He cannot run a PowerPoint presentation without assistance. He knows that his company has an Intranet, but he can’t get to it by himself. The condescension and lack of credibility are so thick when Myron walks into a meeting that you could slash them with a laser pointer.

No matter what group you are trying to lead, you are serving a group of increasingly specialized people. They will not expect you to know everything they know, but they do expect you to be a specialist in something related to the business you are leading. And if you cannot demonstrate basic computer literacy in today’s business environment, you will be a laughingstock.

Select one of the project teams currently in the organizational phase and lead the team yourself. Read everything. Work harder than anyone else does. Attend every meeting.

Make it clear that this is your most important priority.

Attend seminars. Consult with international experts. Make presentations about what you have learned. Write a piece for the company newsletter. Do not cut yourself any slack and eschew all prerogatives of your rank. You will be amazed what this will do for your reputation in the company.

Support the best idea

Christine has her favorites and everybody knows it. She goes to lunch with the same crew every day, and she openly socializes with them after work. When someone outside this inner circle brings up an idea, Christine always insists on finding out what her confidants think about it. The idea is presumably discussed and decided by Chris and her inner circle behind closed doors, since the next anyone hears about the idea is when a decision about it is announced at a general staff meeting. Chris is making a classic leadership mistake. She is making decisions based on people instead of ideas.

There is nothing wrong with having favorites. There is a lot wrong with letting your buddies throttle the generation of ideas. As a leader, you are obligated to search for and support the best idea, even if that idea comes from your worst enemy. Insofar as is possible, you are obligated to keep organizational decision-making out in the open where questions can be raised, challenges can be brought and all kinds of opinions can be voiced and seriously considered. Your objective is to create an environment where motivated and engaged colleagues express, examine, embrace and execute good ideas. This is the only way you can expect everyone to keep a shoulder to the wheel when projects bog down in corporate ooze.

Solicit frank counsel

Without directly saying so, Harry has made it clear to everyone that he only wants to hear good news. Harry is a charismatic superstar. It follows that his organization must be successful. The bottom line is good and Harry is still garnering positive national press, so it would be foolish to suggest that he might be making some strategic mistakes or that the organization might be drifting. The critical voices of the jealous naturally bedevil every successful leader. This is part of the price of success. Lesser minds cannot grasp Harry’s vision. Cautious plodders predictably chafe at the risks involved in the pursuit of true greatness. This is Harry’s position and he is sticking to it.

Look for the prophets in your organization. They possess reputations for telling the truth even when it makes everyone uncomfortable. They are not negative people. They work hard. They pull their weight. But they don’t get caught up in the organizational hype. They have the ears of the front line. They

don't talk much, but when they speak, everyone listens. Build personal relationships with these people. Invite them to fax or email you when they sense something is amiss. Get back to them. Explore the reasons for their concerns. Let them know how much you appreciate their willingness to resist going along with the crowd. Institutional prophets are not always right, but their perspectives are suppressed or ignored at every leader's peril.

Keep your emotions under control

Althea makes impulsive decisions based on how she happens to be feeling at the moment. When enraged—and she gets that way easily and frequently—she often demands that this or that person be fired or disciplined or chewed out or some equally stupid, ill-advised thing. Fortunately, her lieutenants usually manage to save her from herself. They realize that she is just blowing off steam. They nod agreeably, ignore her and then lament her wrongheaded blustering behind her back. Occasionally, she flies off the handle in the presence of the uninitiated and cannot be prevented from indulging in organizational vandalism. Those not regularly subjected to this craziness rightly conclude that their leader is emotionally impaired and wonder why someone with good sense doesn't do something about it.

Executive temper tantrums are not cool. They are never justified. Even though organizational leaders regularly swear and profane and use the F word to impress themselves, locker room talk is not appropriate in the executive suite. Emotional outbursts do not help; they

make matters worse. Anger—indeed, any strong emotional arousal—grinds your decision-making capacity to mush.

Stop talking dirty. Make it clear that you are negatively impressed when others do it. Point out emotional arousal whenever it contaminates your deliberations and invite team members to call attention to your own emotional arousal. It is always a danger sign. When you are aroused, stand down until you can think clearly and behave rationally.

Conclusion

Leadership brings along the baggage of success. Having been selected as leaders, we automatically assume that our beliefs are sacrosanct, our attitudes principled, our feelings merited and our behaviors justified. No matter how inadequate we turn out to be, we have all served under worse leaders and this smug realization deadens our natural desires to stretch or improve. Someone is always nearby to remind us how wonderful we are. To make matters worse, some of the most flawed leaders enjoy enormous success in spite of their shortcomings. This is not an environment that encourages leadership growth.

If you have managed to set aside these burdens of leadership while reading this essay, you have rediscovered or reflected on some of the secrets of leadership success. You may have taken an opportunity to humorously note some of your colleagues' foibles, maybe even a few of your own. You may have decided to make some changes as a result. Good for you.

This content has been reproduced with permission granted from SOMC Press from the original publication of A Portable Mentor for Organizational Leaders. Permission to utilize this content can be obtained through SOMC Press at 740-356-5000. All information and Content on the Site is the property of SOMC Press or its licensors. The Content is protected by copyright laws, trademark and design rights. Any unauthorized use of the Content will be considered a violation of SOMC Press's intellectual property rights. Unless otherwise stated in this document, SOMC Press and its suppliers reserve all tacit and direct rights to patents, trademarks, copyrights or confidential information relating to the Content.